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In order to test language ability and school readiness in children with Head Start experience, 168 disadvantaged children were randomly selected. Only half of the children had previous Head Start experience. All children received the Metropolitan Readiness Test and were observed by their teacher and examiner. The results showed that in language ability, the Head Start children were significantly better able to be understood by their teacher and the examiner, to respond to their peers' questions, although not the teacher's, and to retell a simple story. In school readiness Head Start children were significantly more ready for school as measured by the Metropolitan Readiness Test, and they were significantly better able to give their full name and follow directions. In reaction to school environment, Head Start children ranked significantly higher in participating in voluntary discussions, showing respect for each other, feeling at ease with their peers, feeling self-confident in school, asking questions about unclear directions, answering the examiner's questions, and telling personal experiences to the examiner. Head Start children showed only a tendency to feel the need to conform to regulations. Future research should produce a followup study and an instrument to measure language development in disadvantaged children. A bibliography is included. (JS)

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LANGUAGE ABILITY AND READINESS FOR SCHOOL OF CHILDREN WHO PARTICIPATED IN HEAD START PROGRAMS

by

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A DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Evidence has been presented in this study which shows that there is recognition of the need for special programs for young children of low socio-economic status. Various special programs designed to foster the development of language skills have been the outgrowth of the recognition of the need of disadvantaged children. During the past five years a large number of reports have appeared in which programs of many kinds for disadvantaged young children have been described. One such program is Project Head Start sponsored by the Office of Economic Opportunity which alone reached over a half-million children in the first year, 1965. The Head Start programs were based on premises about the potential effectiveness of pre-school compensatory intervention as a means of breaking intergenerational cycles of economic and cultural deprivation.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the language ability and readiness for school experiences of children who participated in Head Start programs.

Specifically, the study sought data on the following questions:

1. Are there differences in language ability at the beginning of the Junior Primary Program, between children who were in Head Start and those who were not in the program?

2. Are there differences in readiness for school experiences, as measured by a standardized readiness test, at the beginning of the Junior Primary Program, between children who were in Head Start and those who were not in the program?

3. Are there differences in reactions to school at the beginning of the Junior Primary Program between children who were in Head Start and those who were not in the program?

Subjects for this study were 168 children who had entered the Junior Primary Program of the Richmond Public School System in September 1966. One half of these children had Head Start experience before entering; the other half had not. Both groups were composed of an equal number of boys and girls. The children were selected randomly from seven of the 21 schools in Richmond, which had Head Start Programs during the summer of 1966. These seven schools are in the most disadvantaged areas of Richmond.

Sources of data used in this investigation consisted of the Metropolitan Readiness Test, responses from classroom teachers to questions of an "Inventory of Language Ability and Reactions to School Environment", observations of children made by the investigator during the testing, and biographical

data concerning the pupils. Tests were hand scored by the investigator. The z-ratio was computed to determine whether there were significant differences in vocabulary and readiness for school experiences between Head Start children and Non Head Start children. Data from the other sources were summarized for each group. In all cases where frequency of response was to be analyzed the chi square technique was used in determining the significance of differences between the two groups. Differences were accepted as statistically significant if probability, P, is equal to or less than .05.

Findings of the study are summarized according to the questions to which they relate.

Language Ability

1. The mean on the vocabulary test was larger for the Head Start group than for the Non Head Start group. The difference is highly significant ($P < .001$).

2. Teachers indicated that more Head Start children respond to their questions than do Non Head Start children, but the difference is not significant ($.10 > P > .05$).

3. There is a highly significant difference between the Head Start children and the Non Head Start children in their responses to questions of their classmates ($P < .01$). The difference is in favor of the Head Start children.

4. Significantly more Head Start children than Non

Head Start children express themselves so that the teacher can understand them ($P < .001$).

5. There is a highly significant difference between the Head Start and the Non Head Start groups in their ability to retell a simple story they have heard ($P < .001$).

6. Non Head Start children make significantly more errors in pronunciation of certain words than do the Head Start children ($P < .02$).

7. More Head Start children than Non Head Start children expressed themselves so that the examiner could understand them ($P < .05$).

Readiness for School Experiences

1. There is a highly significant difference between the Head Start children and the Non Head Start children in their readiness for school experiences as measured by the total scores of the Metropolitan Readiness Tests ($P < .001$).

2. There are significant differences between the two groups of children in their ability to give their full name ($P < .02$) and to follow directions ($P < .001$). The differences favor the Head Start children.

Reactions to School Environment

1. According to the reports of the teachers more Head

Start children than Non Head Start children participate voluntarily in discussion. The difference is significant ($P < .05$).

2. Teachers reported that significantly more Head Start children show respect for each other than do Non Head Start children ($P < .005$).

3. Teachers reported that more Head Start children than Non Head Start children seemed to feel comfortable with their peers. The difference is highly significant (P .001).

4. More Head Start children than Non Head Start children seemed to feel the need to conform to rules and regulations, but the difference is not significant ($P > .10$).

5. There is a highly significant difference between the Head Start and the Non Head Start children in their apparent feeling of self-confidence when working in school, as reported by the teachers ($P < .005$). The difference favors the Head Start children.

6. More Head Start children than Non Head Start children were able to give the investigator a reason for coming to school and to tell the examiner how they felt about school, even though some of their comments had no relationship to the reasons for which it is assumed one comes to school. There was a noticeable difference between the Head Start children and the Non Head Start children in their ability to answer these questions without hesitating. The differences between the two groups are highly significant ($P < .001$).

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7. More Head Start children than Non Head Start children seemed to give thought to test questions before marking the answer and revealed by their actions if they thought they had given the correct answers to the questions. More Head Start children than Non Head Start children asked questions about the directions if they did not understand them. These differences are all highly significant ($P < .001$).

8. Significantly more Head Start children than Non Head Start children wanted to tell the examiner about their personal experiences relating to the questions asked on the test ($P < .001$).

CONCLUSIONS

Before conclusions are drawn from the findings of this study, recognition should be made of a major limitation. Since there are no appropriate instruments especially designed for use with young children of low socio-economic status it was necessary to base a substantial part of the study on teacher observation of the subjects. Although effort was made to insure thoughtful, unbiased observations, it may be that bias was present. Some of the teachers probably knew which children had participated in the Head Start program. It is possible that enthusiasm for a program for underprivileged children would create in these teachers a more sympathetic reaction to children who had been in such a program.

Within this limitation the following conclusions seem warranted from the data obtained in this study.

1. A short-term program, such as Head Start, produces significant gains in number of words understood by young children of low socio-economic status. A short-term program may also be effective in helping such children make use of the words they know. There was a significant difference between the two groups of children in oral language ability as observed by their teachers and the investigator.

2. The Head Start program is effective in developing readiness for school experiences. A significant difference between the groups was noted on the Metropolitan Readiness Tests and also in the observations of the investigator.

3. There are observable differences in the reactions to school between the Head Start and the Non Head Start children. Reactions of the Head Start children tend to be more favorable.

4. Children who have been in a Head Start program seem to have a greater desire to come to school than do other young children of the same low socio-economic status.

5. Certain aspects of the school program not directly connected with learning are important to young children of low socio-economic class, whether or not they have participated in a Head Start program.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

With the current interest in Head Start programs as an intervention for culturally disadvantaged children the results of this study have several implications. It appears that the development of the young child of low socio-economic class is affected to a significant degree by environmental conditions. Specifically, this development refers to language facility, readiness for school experiences and reactions to school as a beginner. If the results of this study are confirmed by research in progress in other sections of the country, it might not be too unrealistic to expect that, in the near future, the public elementary school would extend its program to include children of a younger age than is done at present.

In planning any program of the school consideration should be given to the special needs of young children of low socio-economic status. Special programs may be required for them. Provision for the development of language skills should permeate the entire program so as to enhance their ability to communicate with their peers and teacher. In these special programs provision should be made for the children to have many opportunities to engage in activities which would foster conversation and discussion. Easel painting, creative dramatics, trips, playing house, socialized lunch

periods and free play might encourage children to talk and help them adjust to various social conditions.

Consideration should be given to the possibility of providing programs longer than eight weeks. The findings of this study indicate that a short term experience produces a significant difference in children of low socio-economic class in terms of number of words understood and ability to express oneself orally. It is possible that longer programs would be even more effective in increasing language ability.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

1. The construction of a suitable instrument to measure language development of young children of low socio-economic class should be undertaken.

2. A follow-up study should be undertaken with the subjects of the present study to determine whether the superiority of the children who were in Head Start will be maintained in subsequent grades. Such a study might be focused on the development of several different language skills.

3. A study might be made to determine whether there are differences at the beginning of Junior Primary between Head Start children and children who are not eligible economically for Head Start, but who may still suffer from cultural deprivation.

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